

WANT TO TAKE A BOW? YOU SAVED CLINTON

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Danny Westneat of The Seattle Times' Washington, D.C., bureau has covered the impeachment trial from the start, writing a daily diary that tried to put this curious, historic proceeding in perspective.

These are his final reflectios.

WASHINGTON - You, the people, saved Bill Clinton.

You may not like your president anymore. You may not trust him.

The latest polls say that 80 percent of you have concluded he is guilty of lying and obstructing justice.

And yet you have stood by him, never wavering in the past year that he should remain as president. Your faithfulness has baffled his accusers. At times, like when the president wagged his finger directly at you and lied, your steady support for him caused many here to wonder whether you were thinking clearly.

But as the impeachment trial concluded yesterday, apparently ending a year of extraordinarily bitter political fighting here, many senators said it was the people who ultimately steered Congress to this verdict.

"They remained absolutely unshakeable in their belief that Congress, the courts and the press had gone too far in this. They were the only truly rational actor in the whole drama," said Sen.

Charles Schumer, D-N.Y.

"Overturning the wishes of 47 million Americans who voted to re-elect President Clinton would have been a radical step," said Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D. "If they want to keep him, then barring an assault on the republic, we should keep him."

It wasn't just Americans. One senator who voted to acquit cited people around the world.

"Internationally, this president is held in extraordinary regard," said Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif. "Ambassador after ambassador from other countries has told me they do not understand why we are doing this."

This view - that in the impeachment trial the public served as silent witness, wise judge and even-handed jury - will come as a surprise to all who have felt powerless during recent months. The most common call or e-mail to this column expressed frustration, as in "I feel helpless to stop this," or "Why is nobody out there listening to me?"

It does seem incongruous that an act as severe as impeachment could get this far without popular support. Washington, D.C., may appear as if it operates on another planet.

But in truth the place is obsessed with what you think. And it has never been more obsessed than during this impeachment saga.

Politicians here scrupulously keep track of letters, phone calls, and e-mail messages from constituents. They read the polls.

Most of them leave here every weekend and return to their states, where they are subjected to the unvarnished opinions of their employers, the voters.

It was in part because of this dynamic that Clinton was impeached in December. For much of last year, the minority calling for Clinton's ouster seemed to drown out the troubled majority who nevertheless wanted to keep him.

Even one senator who voted to acquit yesterday, Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., noted that the same polls that show support for Clinton also say that as many as 40 percent of the people want Clinton out.

"That is a startlingly large percentage of our people who have totally lost confidence in our nation's leader," he said.

A number of senators who voted to convict the president derided this preoccupation with what the people think. Two Republican senators from the Northwest, Slade Gorton of Washington and Gordon Smith of Oregon, specifically said people have a poor reason for wanting to

keep Clinton - that they are happy and the economy is hot.

"I refuse to say that high political polls and soaring Wall Street indexes give license to those in high places to act in low and illegal ways," Smith said.

One senator acknowledged the country wants to keep Clinton, but then he turned the proposition around.

"If a clear majority of the American people were to demand the conviction of the president, should I vote for his conviction even if I believed him to be innocent of the offenses? Of course not," said Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who cast two "guilty" votes.

And yet, as the senators left the Capitol yesterday talking about how they had served their consciences and the Constitution, one couldn't help but think that they never were in charge of these proceedings.

Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., was the most blunt about this. He said Clinton is guilty and that the offenses charged warrant removal from office. But there was a single powerful force, the will of the people, that prevented him from convicting the president, he said.

"It is not a popularity contest," he said. "But most people do not believe that this has been a fair process. The American people deeply believe in fairness, and they have come to view the president as having been put upon for politically partisan reasons.

"If the people think the entire matter was driven by political agendas all around, and they don't support his removal, then . . .

that tips the scales for allowing this president to serve out the remaining 22 months of his term."

There are many myths about politics. One is that politicians are lazy. Another is that they are corrupt. Most untrue of all is that they don't listen to the people.

Not many of these senators like Clinton. They all say they are disgusted by his behavior, and many who voted to acquit are extremely troubled by allowing him to serve. Sen. Bob Kerrey, D-Neb., said it's ironic that Clinton now is so sullied that he doesn't qualify to work in his own Cabinet.

Put another way, it is likely that Byrd and at least some other Democrats would have voted to convict on at least one charge if Americans had turned on the president. Despite some weaknesses in the case, it's entirely conceivable the full Senate could have ousted the president yesterday if more of you had wanted it to.

But after all the lawyering and the \$40 million investigation and the speeches about honesty and duty and oaths, they sided with the general wishes of a majority of you and your neighbors.

Consider that the next time you ponder Congress and feel frustrated and powerless: For better or worse, you saved the president.

Out with a bang. Shortly after the Senate rejected both articles of impeachment yesterday, the Capitol police evacuated the chamber and an entire wing of the building after receiving a bomb threat.

Someone called a business and announced that a bomb would detonate at 2 p.m. in the Senate chamber.

"What a way to end this," said Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J. No bomb was found.

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